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ABSTRACT

This two-page information review presents a brief review of research literature which reinforces the belief that regular physical education programs included in school curricula produces physical, psychological, and intellectual benefits. Eighteen references are cited. (JD)

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Fact Sheet

THE CASE FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION

by Laurie Priest

Today, education programs at all levels face intense criticism, and physical education programs are no exception. In fact, as school budgets shrink and administrators cut "frills," physical education may be one of the first programs to go. If we are to secure a place for physical education in the school curriculum, we must answer two questions: (1) What are the physical, psychological, and intellectual effects of physical education upon the total development of the child? and (2) Given these effects, can physical education be considered a frill?

What are the physical benefits of physical education?

Recent research has shown that degenerative diseases begin in early childhood. As Kaercher (1981) wrote, "There's increasing evidence in youngsters of high cholesterol in the blood, high blood pressure, obesity and other conditions that are associated with heart disease, stroke and other disorders" (p. 20). Bucher (1982) stated that medical specialists blame deaths due to heart disease, cancer, and stroke largely on "changes in lifestyle characterized by factors over which doctors have little or no control" (p. 13).

Research suggests that regular physical activity, begun in childhood, may help prevent degenerative diseases. According to Hanson (1974), "The necessity of physical activity for a growing child is well-documented in terms of growth and fitness needs. Physical activity increases muscle tone, improves respiration and circulation, benefits digestion, aids in controlling obesity, promotes rehabilitation after illness and surgery, and stimulates proper growth and development. Physical benefits alone could be sufficient reason for supporting physical education programs . . . " (p. 2). And Reiff (1977, p. 26) reported that high school students involved in an eight-week program of physical activity showed gains in fitness.

In addition, Fentem and Bassey (1982) pointed out that "Exercise is a valuable adjunct to dietary control in prevention and treatment of obesity because it increases energy expenditure and improves energy balance" (p. 2).

Studies indicate that children in free play settings will not engage in physical activity vigorous enough to produce physical benefits or enhance health, thus supporting the need for physical education (Reiff 1977, p. 26).

What are the psychological/social benefits of physical education?

Physical activity enhances a person's life both socially and psychologically. Studies have shown that physical activity may modify anxiety and depression (Sachs 1982, p. 44). Layman (1972, p. 5) gave evidence that poor physical condition predisposes individuals to poor mental health. Hanson (1974, p. 2) stated that "physical activity contributes to the general feeling of well-being . . . . It is an avenue for expression of anger, aggression and happiness . . . a means for discovery of self as well as a social facilitator." Moreover, according to Espenschade (1960), "The status of the elementary school child with his peers is dependent to a great extent on his motor skills and his behavior in game situations" (p. 3). Clarke (1982, p. 10) added to these statements, suggesting that the child's realization of personal and social effectiveness relies heavily on guidance within the physical education experience. Guidance helps the individual adopt desirable modes of behavior and improve interpersonal relationships.

What are the mental/intellectual benefits of physical education?

Research shows a positive relationship between physical activity and academic achievement. In one study, begun in 1951 in an elementary school in Vanves, France, the school day was divided so that four hours were devoted to academics and one to two hours to physical education, art, music, and supervised study (Bailey 1976). By 1960, not only were health, fitness, discipline, and enthusiasm superior in the experimental program, but academic performance also surpassed controlled classes. Similar experiments in Belgium and Japan produced comparable results (Carlson 1982, p. 68), illustrating the importance of physical education to a successful academic program.

How does physical education affect children's development of wholesome recreation habits?

The importance of wise use of leisure time was supported as early as 1918 in the Seven Cardinal

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Principles of Secondary Education (National Education Association). Children need recreational skills and a positive attitude toward exercise to enhance their use of leisure. Indeed, "Research indicates that motor skills learned in physical education classes may be the stimulus for increased activity during leisure time (Seefeldt 1977, p. 3). Gilliam and others demonstrated that physical education programs involving vigorous activities encourage participants to use leisure time more actively (p. 3). Thus, physical education can play a major role in promoting an active, healthy lifestyle.

Conclusion

Research indicates that regular physical education, included in children's school curricula, produces physical, psychological, and intellectual benefits. Physical education may help prevent degenerative disease, improve overall physical condition, maintain emotional balance, promote a sense of social effectiveness, contribute to academic performance, and establish positive recreation habits. Therefore, physical education must not be considered a curricular frill; rather, it must be supported as an integral part of comprehensive education.

For further information, write to Margaret Seiter, American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1900 Association Drive, Reston, Va. 22091.

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